

The role of women in the lives of the Prophets

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 25 September 2020

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَذُرِّيَّةً ط

“And certainly We sent messengers before you and appointed for them wives and children.” (13:38)

The topic of today’s *khutba* is: The role of women in the lives of the Prophets. According to this verse, messengers of Allah had wives and children. Apart from the other points which this statement can teach us, one is that the wives of the prophets played a role in the success of their missions. Of course, this was not so in the case of every prophet. Also, additionally, in the lives of the major prophets, there were women, other than their wives, who played an important role. We will refer to their examples as well.

Let us start with Adam. We are not discussing here if he was the first man or not. The way he is mentioned in the Quran, he seems to be symbolic of every human being, and in some ways he is symbolic of every prophet. If we take him here as the first prophet, the first command he was given, before being made a prophet, was as follows:

وَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغَدًا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾ فَأَزَلَّهُمَا الشَّيْطَانُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ

“And We said: O Adam, dwell you and your wife in the garden, and eat from it a plentiful (food) wherever you wish, and do not approach this tree or you would be from among the unjust. But the devil made them slip from it, and caused them to depart from the state in which they were.” (2:35–36)

Here Adam’s wife is equally addressed, “dwell you and your wife”. And in the words “eat”, “do not approach”, “you would be”, the tense used is dual, not singular. The

Arabic language has a dual tense as well, in addition to the singular and plural tenses in all languages. Again, the dual tense is used in “the devil *made them* slip from it, and *caused them* to depart from the state in which *they were*”. So they were both taken in and deceived by the devil who made them both disobey the Divine command. According to the same story in the Bible, the devil only tempted the woman into breaking the command of God, and she then persuaded Adam to do the same. But the Quran tells us that it is not women who are specially prone to being tempted by the devil, and they then go on to mislead men. The devil tempts the man and the woman. She was a participant with Adam in good and bad.

Regarding the creation of human beings, the Quran says: “We have created you from a male and a female” (49:13) and it also says that men and women originate from a single being *and* its mate (4:1). So without the role of that female mate, mankind would not exist. Although in a number of verses mankind is addressed as “children of Adam”, there is one verse in which it is stated: “O children of Adam, do not let the devil seduce you, as he expelled *your parents* from the garden” (7:27). So it is both of them who are parents of mankind.

Coming now to Abraham, the question is: which woman played a role in his mission? We know it was Hagar or Hajira. But she is not mentioned in the Quran. However, the Quran does say:

إِنَّ الصَّفَا وَالْمَرْوَةَ مِنْ شَعَائِرِ اللَّهِ

“The Safa and the Marwah are truly among the signs of Allah” (2:158). How did the Safa and the Marwah become the signs of Allah? Only because Hagar ran between them looking for water, so that she and the baby Ishmael may survive and the prayer of Abraham may be fulfilled which begins with the words: “Our Lord, I have settled a part of my offspring in a valley unproductive of fruit near Your Sacred House, our Lord, that they may keep up prayer” (14:37). It was due to Hagar that that progeny survived near the Sacred House. So she played a vital, indispensable role in Abraham’s mission.

Now we come to Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson. A woman played what at first was a *negative* role in his life. She made a false accusation against him and he was sent to prison. It was from his dealings with his fellow-prisoners that people found out about his ability to interpret dreams and this news reached the king. It led to the king placing him in charge of the treasury, which eventually resulted in the reunion with his parents and brothers. The women who accused him eventually admitted: "We knew of no evil on his part" (12:50).

Coming to Moses, his mother played a crucial role in saving him from being one of those infants who were killed by order of Pharaoh. She acted on her revelation from God to place him in a chest and cast him into the river. She was assured by the revelation that he would be brought back to her. The chest floated in the river to another shore and Moses was picked up by the Pharaoh's daughter. So Moses' mother saved him from being slaughtered. Then his sister went up and suggested to Pharaoh's family that she knew of some people who would bring him up for them. Thus it was through his sister that the baby Moses returned home to be brought up by his mother.

The next women to help Moses were the two shy girls whom he met when he was on the run in a foreign country. He came across the two young women who were waiting to water their elderly father's flock of animals because the men shepherds were going ahead of them to water their flocks. So Moses watered their flock for them. The young women told their father about his act of kindness and one of them recommended to her father that he should employ him. So he offered Moses shelter and employment, and Moses married one of the two women. Although it was Moses who helped the women first, it was they who helped him in getting shelter and employment at a time when he was in great need and had been praying to God for help.

Coming to Jesus, he owes so much to a woman, his mother Mary, that he is called "the son of Mary" in the Quran more than twenty times. People think he is called "son of Mary" to show that he was born without a father. But the reason may be that the Quran is highlighting the role of Mary in his life. She underwent great hardship and pain to give birth to him, as the Quran relates. Then she had to endure allegations and

aspersions against her character for his sake. Most Muslims believe that Jesus was born without a father and that the Jews accused her of conceiving him through an illegitimate connection with a man. We believe that the charge of the Jews against Mary, as described in the Quran, doesn't relate to how he was conceived but it came about because Jesus in his preaching was bitterly condemning the evils of the Jewish priests and religious leaders. So they accused her of being bad in bringing up such a bad son. But in any case, she had to bear that slander.

Another role Mary played in the mission of Jesus is that she herself was a deeply impressive model of righteousness and was envied for her piety. That noble example must have influenced the character of Jesus, even though his holy status came from being appointed a prophet by God. To sum up, the Quran says about a man who is believed to be God or Son of God by about two billion people in the world today that he was merely the son of a woman.

Coming to the Holy Prophet Muhammad, a book could be written about the role played by women in advancing his mission. It starts with Khadijah, who gave him comfort and reassurance when he was bewildered by his first experience of revelation. Then she supported him financially, emotionally and morally during the first ten years of his mission.

The women whom he married after that chose to live a life of material austerity and simplicity like the Holy Prophet's own life, so as to be an example to Muslim women. He had offered his wives the choice of taking some material wealth and leaving him amicably, without any blame attaching to them (33:28–29). But they chose to remain with him. They had to adhere to higher moral standards than other Muslim women (33:32). As being the Holy Prophet's wives, and thus public figures, they accepted the risk of facing false allegations from malicious persons. They were required to remember and properly understand the teachings of Islam and communicate them to other Muslims (33:34), to both men and women, to the great Companions and the ordinary people. They were given, in the Quran, the title of “mothers of the believers”

(33:6), which indicates that they acted like spiritual mothers in the upbringing of Muslims.

As to the Holy Prophet's offspring and children, the Quran itself tells us that "Muhammad is not the father of any man from among you" (33:40). He left no sons, and he had no sons who lived beyond infancy. So his physical lineage was continued by a woman, his daughter Fatima. Yet the desire to have sons is overwhelming among Muslims, as it is among certain non-Muslim communities also.

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